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THE WEST AND THE WAR WITH MEXICO.

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Our very critical relations with Mexico at the present time may lend some interest and timeliness to a study of the West and the war with Mexico. Thoughtful men everywhere feel that the next four years may bring upon us a repetition of the imperialism of 1898 or even of 1848, and there is reason to fear that the present conflicts in the republic to the south of us may give an American president the opportunity to avoid pressing difficulties at home by involving the country in a policy of aggrandizement abroad. Such was the case in 1898, and such occasions have been the most fruitful causes of wars from time immemorial. One naturally recalls the Austro-Prussian conflict of 1866 and the Franco-Prussian war of 1870. We are in the midst of most pressing internal difficulties, and public men of today, who can not control the economic forces around them or grapple with imperious tariff problems, are but human, and they are not above following in the footsteps of Polk or McKinley, or, to mention greater names, Bismarck and Napoleon III.

In such a contingency, the attitude of the West will hardly be less important than it was seventy years ago, though I am inclined to think that its point of view will be entirely inconsistent with its earlier history and that it will have reversed rôles with the East where human rights are matters of less concern than they were when James K. Polk was president. Now it is the Northeast and the South which look with longing eyes toward the rich mines and "teeming harbors" of a Mexico in American hands, while the West thinks less of national aggrandizement and fears that human rights are not so certain as they were once supposed to be.

The West has decided more than once what the national course should be. In 1800, it was western votes that put Thomas Jefferson in the President's chair; and Andrew Jackson was the gift of the "Mississippi states" to the country. And coming more directly to our theme, it was the West and the South which put their heads together at Baltimore in May, 1844, and worked out the program of the "re-annexation of Texas and the re-occupation of Oregon," the "all-of-Texas, all-of-Oregon," "now-or-never idea" which won the election against the great Clay and inaugurated a policy of imperialism which all the bloodshed of the civil war scarcely checked.

Jackson had planned that his friend, Van Buren, should succeed him, and that his next best friend, Benton, should follow in the Presidency, each having eight years, but no more, which would have taken care of the country until 1852, when, doubtless, some other man, equal to the great occasion would arise.¹ There came a little hitch in 1840, and Van Buren failed of a re-election; the Whigs came to power. Western Democrats felt that the mistake had been with the New York president, and they set themselves to the task of retrieving their error. The Baltimore convention was the scene of their anxious endeavors. The Texas-Oregon program, known to be popular in all the West and South, was their appeal, regardless of the almost certain war with both England and Mexico that would follow. And the one man they did not want was Jackson's favorite, Van Buren. A way was found to relieve the party of the disagreeable load, and James K. Polk, a westerner, was put at the head of the revolutionary ticket. Half of the men from Ohio, all of those from Michigan, Indiana and Illinois joined the eager Virginians and members from the lower South in this work which looked directly to war.¹ The architect of this most fruitful alliance was Robert James Walker of Mississippi,² the most resourceful

¹ *National Intelligencer*, May 25, 28, 30 and Oct. 3 and 5, 1844; C. E. Persinger, *The Bargain of 1844 as the origin of the Wilmot Proviso*, a paper read at the meeting of the Am. Hist. Asso., 1911.

² *National Intelligencer*, May 28, 30, 1844.

politician of his time, a manipulator of men and the "interests" quite as masterful in his day as was Mark Hanna in 1896. An able leader of the senate, he was "spoken of" for the vice-presidency in early 1844, and he replied to one of the public calls of this character in a letter on Texas and Oregon, which attained the widest circulation of any pamphlet of the day. In this remarkable paper, Walker said, "It's no Union-dissolving spirit that animates the West in this campaign for Texas and Oregon." Indeed, the whole pamphlet was a western appeal, which the author made in the most plausible language possible.

Pretending the closest friendship for Van Buren, he nevertheless moved "heaven and earth" to bring about the defeat of the candidate who already had two-thirds of the delegates instructed for him at Baltimore and the followers of Lewis Cass, hoping to benefit by the ruin of Van Buren, joined him. Allen and Hannegan and Breese and Bright of the Northwest united with the audacious Mississippian, and his ambitious co-laborers from the Southwest, and the convention, as has already been said, repudiated the able New Yorker and wrote Walker's pamphlet into their platform and then nominated Walker's candidate for the presidency.

When Polk went to Washington, as the spokesman of the West and South, and took up the reins of government, he invited Walker to a principal seat in the cabinet and began at once the execution of the decree of the people who seemed to him to have said "all of Texas, all of Oregon." And in his simple-minded loyalty to his party pledges, he gave no heed to threats of war on the part of England. The country had said, "carry out your program;" if that meant war with all Europe, it was not his affair. Calhoun, a more experienced politician, looked upon this simple procedure as an example of the most dangerous western tendencies; he had thought that platforms were made to win elections not to guide the course of statesmen when in office, and perhaps some modern leaders have felt the same way, to their undoing.

But the West was in earnest and the declaration of war which the President managed to get Mexico to provoke was to all the great valley of the Mississippi a call to arms of the most urgent character. With a population of 4,700,000 in 1850, the Northwest sent nearly 25,000 soldiers to the front, while the whole North from Maryland to Maine, with a population of 9,300,000, furnished only 27,000. The Southwest, including Kentucky and Missouri, had according to the same census, 4,985,000 people, of whom at least one-third were negroes; but from these lower Mississippi states, there went more than 45,000 soldiers.¹ Of the total number of volunteers, 69,540, at least 40,000 were from the strictly western states and 17,320 were from the sparsely settled Northwest, mainly Illinois and Indiana; while from all the northern states with a population twice as great and wealth many times greater, only 7,930 volunteers offered.² Plainly, the interest in the Mexican war was in the West and South, and more in the former than in the latter.

It was not merely the question of Texas that set all these troops in motion. The West wanted most or all of Mexico, and their leaders had been bred to a hatred of England and a desire for the annexation of Canada which caused them to seize upon any opportunity that gave promise of expansion northward or to the northwest. And there was still another reason. The West loved the Union: it was to the interest of this section to love the Federal government. And a favorite theory of theirs had come down to them from Jefferson: that, as the number of states increased, the stability of the Union was the more certain. Walker had not miscalculated when he urged in his pamphlet, "as you augment the number of states, the bond of Union is stronger."³ The men who drew the program at Baltimore believed that the United States should embrace the whole

¹*Executive Documents*, vol. VIII, Doc. 62; 30th Congress, 1st Sess. vol. IV, no. 38; *Niles Register*, LXXIII, 246.

²*Executive Documents*, vol. VIII, Doc. 62; 30th Congress. 1st Sess. vol. IV, No. 38.

³Walker's *Letter on Texas*, January 8, 1844, p. 9.

area of North America,¹ and when the Calhoun treaty was still pending before the senate, Walker, Allen of Ohio, Breese of Illinois, Bagby of Alabama and Fulton of Arkansas tried to pick a quarrel with England,² the nation which stood in the way of this extravagant expansion in order, it would seem, to advance their views. England was known to be interested in California, in northern Mexico and Texas, and desirous of holding the Pacific coast from Alaska to the gulf of California.³ The editor of the greatest paper in Illinois said as early as December 27, 1844: "If war shall ensue, let it not close until the empire of Mexico, as well as Texas, is added to the territory of the Union; and the broad continent only limit the domains of the United States from east to west."⁴ While "Long John" Wentworth, then close to the President-elect, wrote to his paper, the *Chicago Democrat*, in the early days of March, 1845, "the United States must possess California."⁵ And during the autumn of 1846, and the first half of 1847, the purposes and ambitions of the leaders of the West became clearer still. At first there was a fear of England which only an almost unanimous feeling that the Pacific coast all the way to Alaska must become American enabled the politicians to overcome. Next came the demand for all the upper part of Mexico, of which the *Illinois State Register* declared, "all the foreign bluster on earth" should not be allowed to deprive us.⁶ This sentiment grew as the months passed, until the whole West seemed committed to the policy of a complete dismemberment of Mexico; and the leading eastern organs of public opinion one after another took up the cry. The *New York Sun* said "Providence has willed this war to unite and exalt both nations, which result we now believe is as certain and inevitable as

¹ Walker's *Letter on Texas*, January 8, 1844, p. 9.

² *Congressional Globe*, June 14, 1844.

³ *Illinois State Register*, July 3d, 1844; Smith, Justin H., *The Annexation of Texas*, 230, 417.

⁴ *Illinois State Register*, December 27, 1844.

⁵ *Sangamo Journal*, March 20, 1845.

⁶ *Illinois State Register*, December 4, 1846.

any event in human history;"¹ and Commodore Stockton was applauded all over the country, but particularly in the West, for saying, at a dinner in Philadelphia on December 20th: "Mexico is prostrate at our feet. We can afford to be magnanimous I would with a magnanimous and kindly hand gather these wretched people within the fold of Republicanism."² Calhoun said in the senate at the close of the year: "You can hardly read a newspaper without finding it filled with speculation upon this subject³ [the annexation of all Mexico.] And the New York state Democratic convention, which met about this time, gravely resolved: "That the title of the Mexican government is a title by conquest from those who held it by conquest. If we took it and held it by the same title, they could not complain. Their title is legal; and our title would also be legal."⁴ One is tempted here to inquire whether the framers of these resolutions ever thought of what men call humor.

The South and the West had agreed upon a war program at Baltimore; they increased their demands every day after the war began; they won to their cause many of the ablest organs of public opinion in the North, such as the *New York Sun*, the *Evening Post*, which was now calling upon the government "to hurry to fulfil the manifest destiny of humbling and subduing the devoted race and of taking upon ourselves the fulfilment of the purposes of Providence in regard to these neighbors of ours,"⁵ and the *Washington Union*, which needed no persuasion from the West, preached daily the same doctrine. Before Congress assembled in December, every influence had been brought to bear upon the President to induce him, who already inclined to such a course, to recommend in the annual message the complete dismemberment of Mexico.⁶

Two obstacles were in the way and they saved to the con-

¹ Quoted in the *National Intelligencer*, November 20, 1847.

² *Niles Register*, LXXIII, 335. ³ *Niles Register*, LXXIII, 272.

⁴ *Niles Register*, LXXIII, 390. ⁵ *Ibid*, 334. ⁶ Polk's *Diary*, edited by M. M. Quaife, III, 226-30; *American Historical Review*, v. 493-5.

quered country for the moment its national existence: the administration had in April preceding, sent Nicholas Trist, an amateur diplomat, to Mexico with definite instructions to treat on the basis of the annexation of Texas, New Mexico, Arizona and California. Trist had quarrelled with General Scott and had been recalled. He patched up a peace with the general and refused to recognize his recall. With the support of Scott, an ardent Whig who enjoyed the prospect of embarrassing his own government, Trist negotiated a treaty securing all that had been demanded, and it was hastened to Washington, where it was received on the night of February, 19, 1848. The other obstacle was the fact that the house of representatives, which was to the imperialists a doubtful quantity, had been chosen in the summer and autumn of 1846 before the thirst for all of Mexico had developed and when the Whig outcry against the manner of beginning the war was most effective. But after considerable study of the situation in congress in the winter of 1847-48, I am convinced that even the house would have yielded had it not been for the embarrassing arguments which the irregular Trist treaty gave to the opponents of the "benevolent" imperialism of the time.¹ The President, as fortune would have it, was a man of strong scruples, and he did not know how to undo the work of his own agent, much as he would have liked to do so. Perhaps another such crisis will find a more versatile president in office.

But the ablest member of the cabinet, Walker, supported by Buchanan, the secretary of state, and a candidate for the next Democratic nomination, insisted that the opportunity must not be allowed to pass. The vice-president, George M. Dallas, a brother-in-law of Walker, favored then, as before, both "all of Mexico" and "all of Oregon,"²

¹ McMaster, J. B. *History of the People of the United States*, VII, 525-7.

² Letter to Wm. S. Conly, *Niles Register*, LXXIII, 392, in which he said "there was nothing in our noble constitution not equal to the task assigned by the resistless force of events—the guardianship of a crowded and a confederated continent."

and the leaders of the senate majority were committed to the same view.

Meanwhile, conditions in Europe had so changed and become so critical that American politicians who might otherwise have feared intervention felt perfectly safe and free to proceed along any lines their interests or their cupidity suggested. France was in the throes of revolution, and Germany and Italy were following suit as rapidly as possible. This situation gave England as much to do in Europe as she could well attend to, and consequently the region bordering on the Gulf of Mexico became an open field to American aggression. George Bancroft, minister to the court of St. James, wrote to Secretary Buchanan that Europe thought that it "would be a blessing to the world if the United States would assume the tutelage of Mexico."¹ But we may safely assume that the great historian had not found it difficult to arrive at this conclusion, for in the Baltimore convention, where he was a delegate from Massachusetts, he had distinguished himself by the following speech: "We are willing that the decision of this convention shall carry joy to the democracy from Maine to Louisiana. We are willing to roll it westward—and that it shall carry hope to the valley of the west, and make glad the hearts of those who dwell on the banks of the Colorado and the Rio del Norte." To which Henry, an ardent expansionist of North Carolina, replied "three cheers for the historian of the United States," and, says the reporter, "they were given *con amore*."² Having done his utmost to secure the adoption of the western program and the nomination of an ardent imperialist for the presidency, we may fairly assume that the historian, now honored with high office by his successful party, was diligent in finding favorable opinion in Europe. In quite another sense, Alexander von Humboldt, the great traveler and naturalist, said that the United States would annex Mexico and then fall to pieces fighting about the control of the new territory.³

¹*American Historical Review*, v. 498. ²*National Intelligencer*, October 5, 1844. ³Quoted in *American Historical Review*, v. 498.

Senator Cass, the spokesman of the administration in the senate, understood the European situation and insisted now, as well as later, that "there never has been a better opportunity offered to any nation."¹ This was the opinion of most southern and western senators when the treaty was received and it was their purpose to oppose or delay its acceptance until opportunity should offer for the presentation of a demand on Mexico looking to the annexation of the whole country, or at least all of that portion lying east of the great arid plateau, that is, the whole Gulf coast from Texas to Central America. Just how far the President resisted his lieutenants in Congress would be difficult to determine, but we do know that there was a way of reopening the whole subject even after the treaty was accepted; that was in the plan to declare Yucatan, then in revolt against Mexico, under the protection of the United States. Such a plan was already under consideration and a representative of Yucatan was on the ground urging the President almost daily to hasten to take over his country.²

On March 10, the treaty was accepted; but the imperialists were not disheartened, for on April 22, Buchanan presented to the cabinet the petition of Commissioner Sierra of Yucatan asking immediate intervention.³ The opposition to the treaty now came with redoubled energy to the service of Walker and Buchanan. The point of departure for the leading southerners and westerners in the final effort to secure all of Mexico was "Now is the accepted time." Houston of Texas, who certainly knew better than most others how important it was to act while England was busy elsewhere, was one of the most active and insistent advocates of immediate occupation. One of the most familiar arguments of the whole discussion, and which does not sound very strange to our ears today, was the "duty assigned by Providence of carrying the blessings of American liberty and a real Christian religion to those poor people sitting in utter darkness."

¹ *Congressional Globe*, 30th Cong., 1st Sess., Apr. 29, 1848.

² Polk's *Diary*, III, 430. ³ *Ibid*, 430, 432, 433.

On April 29, the President sent a message to congress recommending immediate intervention in Yucatan, where independence of Mexico had been declared a year before and where civil war then prevailed. The Yucatanese asked assistance with a view to protection against the so-called "savage element" of their own population and against the enraged Mexicans, who upon the return of peace might be expected to punish the recalcitrant peninsular. President Polk and his cabinet seem to have determined now to take this opportunity to reopen the question of the annexation of all Mexico and at the same time to suggest to the country the policy of purchasing Cuba as completing the American mastery of the Gulf of Mexico. The two men who were placed in charge of the proposed legislation were the most ardent imperialists in Congress, Senator Hannegan of Indiana and Representative Howell Cobb of Georgia. The President had frequently noted in his diary that Hannegan¹ was "bent" on holding all Mexico; he had said that such extremists were about to wreck the administration's policy when the treaty was under consideration. Why did he now make Hannegan the sponsor of the proposed bill for the seizure of Yucatan at the very moment the treaty was before the Mexican government for ratification? And why were all the extremists in Congress acting as by preconcerted arrangement for immediate intervention without giving time for debate or even a careful reading of the documents bearing on the subject, which, Calhoun showed in his speech of opposition,² had all been before the cabinet three days before the treaty was accepted? The answer seems to force itself: the President and the great party of expansion had definite news of conditions in Europe which gave every assurance that no interference need be feared either from England or France, both interested in Mexican affairs, and regretting the Trist treaty from the beginning, they decided to take more or all of Mexico.

¹ Polk's *Diary*, III, 365. ² Cong. Globe, 30th Cong., 1st Sess., App. 591.

The reading of the President's message was the signal for the beginning of a most noteworthy discussion in both senate and house. Hannegan brought a bill into the senate on May 4, authorizing the President to send a portion of the army then in Mexico to Yucatan, while Cass and Jefferson Davis pressed again the bill allowing the increase of the army of occupation by twenty thousand soldiers. The champions of the measure openly stated that it was quite likely that permanent occupation of the disturbed region would be the result.¹ Hannegan insisted that it was time to forestall the English plan of seizing Yucatan and Cuba, of which he said he had evidence of a most convincing nature. It was the purpose of Great Britain to control the Gulf of Mexico and thus once again close the Mississippi.² Foote of Mississippi said, "With Cuba and Yucatan, we will have complete control of the Gulf of Mexico, and of all the commerce that floats over its surface; we will have it in our power to establish at once a direct communication between the Pacific and Atlantic oceans; we will be able to secure to ourselves the rich monopoly of the East India trade; we will be safe in every direction from foreign assailment."³ Jefferson Davis insisted that England was engaged in the nefarious work of undermining American control of the trade of her own great river. "I have no confidence in the humanity of Great Britain, the great slave-trader of the world." And he added, "If any maritime power threatens our control of the Gulf of Mexico, which I hold to be a basin of water belonging to the United States, my step will be forward and the cape of Yucatan and the island of Cuba must be ours."⁴ Senator Breese of Illinois was more rhythmic, if not more poetic, than the rest when he quoted a familiar western couplet urging the view of his state:

"No pent-up Utica contracts our powers,
But the whole boundless continent is ours."⁵

Such was the language of senators and representatives from all the western and southern states and their constant

¹ *Cong. Globe*, 30th Cong, 1st Sess., Appx. 591. ² *Ibid*, 596-98. ³ *Ibid*, 602-3. ⁴ *Ibid*, 599. ⁵ See debate on the Mexican War, Feb. 14, 1848.

refrain was, with Houston of Texas, "When again will the state of Europe be found so auspicious to the up-building of free institutions upon this continent? . . . Europe is convulsed. England has to guard her own position. . . . We are left to the accomplishment of the great object of our mission here."¹ And what lends importance to these radical views of responsible party leaders is the evidence offered by almost every newspaper that came to hand. Senator Cass, who was almost certain to be the nominee of his party then about to assemble in convention, said that "Providence has placed us, in some measure, at the head of the republics of this continent and there never has been a better opportunity offered to any nation to fulfil the high duty confided to it than the present."² This was stated on the day the new move was made in the senate; ten days later he added: "The Gulf of Mexico, Sir, must be practically an American lake for the great purpose of security."³ Even Thomas H. Benton, out of harmony though he was with his party, voted to advance the program of imperialism; and Douglas, if somewhat cautious on this occasion, was heart and soul with these leaders of the Democracy. It may appear to some that there was not so much danger since the Whig party was returned to power in November following. This is not conclusive, for the Whigs were afraid to risk a statement on the subject in the campaign then opening and Cass was defeated only by the "bolt" of the Van Buren element of the party—a movement directed at slavery and not against this part of the Democratic program.

It was, indeed, a popular movement which men like Clay and Tom Corwin of the west and Calhoun of the south, regarded with the utmost concern, but which they could not defeat. Meetings were held in Kentucky, in Ohio and in New England—meetings which remind the student of recent anti-imperialist gatherings, much respected but little heeded. The President himself sent word to congress, on

¹ *Cong. Globe*, 30th Cong., 1st Sess., Appx. 603-4. ² *Ibid*, Apr. 29. ³ *Ibid* May 10, pp. 613-17.

May 17, that the people of Yucatan had settled their difficulties and that his friends must withdraw the pending legislation. It is more than likely that Mexico scented the danger and succeeded in bringing matters to a satisfactory conclusion before the United States presented them with another Texas question. It is amusing, seventy years after, to read in the debates the embarrassment of eminent northern senators, like John A. Dix of New York, when this sudden halt was called and their belligerent speeches were left half delivered to rise up and condemn them on a later day.¹ It was not the opposition of the Whigs nor the fears of the party in power, but an accident, an adventitious circumstance that saved the country, under the leadership of the West and South, from taking possession of Yucatan and venturing still further upon the sea of imperialism inaugurated by the Baltimore convention—a sea upon which we have been again scattering bread as occasion offered during recent years.

In conclusion, it seems fairly certain that the combination of southern and western interests at Baltimore was the work of Robert J. Walker, later secretary of the treasury in the Polk cabinet and through the succeeding four years the most powerful influence in the administration. He was foremost during the whole period in the campaign for "all Mexico," he opposed the ratification of the Trist treaty, and he did his utmost to bring the senate to a vote on intervention in Yucatan before the Mexican authorities could ratify the recent agreement.

Associated with Walker during the most or all of this period were Senator Cass, the Democratic candidate for President in 1848, most of the senators and representatives from western and southern states, and a large number of the Democratic leaders from the north and east. All the leading Democratic newspapers of the South and West insisted upon "all Mexico" for a time and a larger cession of territory than was finally agreed upon all the time; and among eastern papers many of the ablest advocated the

¹ *Cong. Globe*, 30th Cong., 1st Sess., Appx. 778.

same extreme policy. The President himself was willing to be led by his expansionist followers, and he longed for at least enough of Mexico to secure to the United States the complete domination of the gulf of Mexico, of the prospective isthmian canal and the expanded "shore-line" on the Pacific, now giving Senator Lodge and other distinguished public men so much anxiety.

And when all these magnificent plans were at the most promising stage, European nations which had hitherto blocked American expansion in these directions were overwhelmed with sudden revolutionary movements. This would certainly have meant the annihilation of Mexico, but for the wholly unprecedented conduct of Minister Trist in refusing to recognize his recall during the closing days of 1847, and the negotiation of a treaty which General Scott promised the Mexicans would be accepted in spite of the known hostility of his President. When this sad blunder barred the way to "all Mexico" there yet remained the promising condition of things in Yucatan, which was utilized to the utmost, until suddenly there came the news, on May 16, 1848, that the Yucatanese had patched up their difficulties, and the government retired chagrined from a field nearly won, but lost on a fumble. Its final shot was the recommendation to purchase Cuba while "times were good" or take it if England showed any signs of moving in that direction. Truly the Democrats of the Polk régime were of the annexing mind; and when the Whigs succeeded to them in power, as has always happened under similar conditions, all that had been done was approved and steps were taken to continue the program.